



JOSE ROSALES 2018-08-28

1968-2018: PLUS ÇA CHANGE, PLUS C'EST LA MÊME CHOSE(?)

NONPOLITICS BADIOU, COMMUNIST HYPOTHESIS, MAY 68, REBELLION, RIOT

A working (and incomplete) draft of my talk for the "68 & its Double-binds" conference (University of Kent)

[intro]

50 years on and who would have thought that France's very own Christophe Castaner (Minister for Parliamentary Relations) would be the one to mark the occasion and set the mood. For Castaner and the institutions which he so valiantly defends, there will be little difference in how the State commemorates its 50th anniversary when, speaking to BFM TV, he assuredly **claims** that "There will be no lawless zones in France." And just as it was for De Gaulle's government in '68, so too is it for Macron's: 50 years on and the events of May persist in their significance insofar as they take on the form of a problem. In light of these events, the legacy of '68 appears to be something more than any presentation of a set of political solutions or prescriptions. Rather, May '68 persists in the present in the guise of a problem (i.e. the essence of 68 as the form of Problems themselves). Reason being that for thinkers such as Badiou, the problem posed by 68 belongs strictly to the order of *politics*, while others such as Guattari conceive of '68's problematic as *socio-economic* in essence. And for others still, such as Jean-Luc Nancy, the problem of May is a decidedly *metaphysical* problem in nature.

So it seems that the fate of '68 was to become an eternal site of contested historical remembering, always irreducible to any single political issue (i.e. students, workers, filmmakers, youth, women, etc.). Hence the suggestion that "the meaning of May" signifies less a resolution of contradictions and more so a formulation of a set of problems. However, from the vantage point of our present, it is necessary to reopen this debate in order to inquire as to whether or not we still remain '68's contemporaries, as Badiou has claimed. In other words, *is it as simple as recognizing the fact that contemporary struggles continue to lack the relevant forms and organization of political subjectivity capable of ushering in a qualitative transformation of the forces/relations of production, alongside with the attendant social relations of capital?* In what follows, we will see how even this fidelity to '68-as-problem a la Badiou must itself be problematized; since, unlike '68, the current cycle of struggles find themselves circumscribed by a qualitatively different composition of race, gender, nationality, capital, and class. For our present is defined not only by a 'crisis' of capital, but by a direct confrontation with the increasing impossibility of self-reproduction for an ever growing number of surplus populations. And as we will see, contra Badiou and '68's discovery regarding the inefficiency of the traditional figure of

revolutionary subjectivity, the present appears to be defined more by what Marx termed 'the multiplication of the proletariat;' a multiplication, that is, of the number of potentially revolutionary social-positions relative to capital.

[1]

"I would like to begin by asking a very simple question: why all this fuss about May '68 – articles, broadcasts, discussions and commemorations of all kinds – 40 years after the event? There was nothing of the kind for the thirtieth or twentieth anniversary" (*Communist Hypothesis*, 33). Thus begins Badiou's reflections on the 40th anniversary of the events, which transpired across the country during that month of May in 1968. And not without justification, for it is indeed strange that May '68 has become worthy of national commemoration only once 40 years of silence has come to pass (and which to some would be better understood as four decades of historical forgetting). Beginning with this question what we are able to see is that there have been two dominant ways of answering this question. On the one hand, there are a set of answers that can be said to be pessimistic & propose the idea that it is possible to commemorate May '68 precisely because it no longer has any socio-political influence on the present. Or we could say that this commemoration is possible because what was really achieved through the events of May was the establishment of the conditions of possibility for neoliberalism. On the other hand, there are those answers that are decidedly optimistic – ranging from arguments that view this commemorative moment as a looking towards the past for the inspiration needed to change the present, to those who still hold on to an image of political upheaval that held out the promise of another world is possible. Now, in contradistinction to these positions, and by emphasizing what he takes to be May '68's irreducibly complex character, Badiou argues that there are not two but *four* different May's:

the reason why this commemoration is complicated and gives rise to contradictory hypotheses is that May '68 itself was an event of great complexity. It is impossible to reduce it to a conveniently unitary image. I would like to transmit to you this internal division, the heterogeneous multiplicity that was May '68. *There were in fact four different May '68's*. The strength and the distinctive feature of the French May '68 is that it entwined, combined and superimposed four processes that are, in the final analysis, quite heterogeneous.

(Badiou, *Communist Hypothesis*, 34-5)

In place of both optimistic and pessimistic mystification, what goes by the name 'May 1968' was a political sequence that was effectuated due to the interplay of (i) the student/university uprising, (ii) the general strike organized by workers and unions, and (iii) the cultural protestations which arose most notably from young people and filmmakers. And it is for this reason, says Badiou, that it comes as no surprise that the symbolic sites of '68 are "the occupied Sorbonne for students, the big car plants (and especially Billancourt) for the workers, and the occupation of the Odéon theatre" (39). Now, while each of these segments of '68 correspond to the first three iterations of May'68, what constitutes this supposed 'fourth' May? And what is its relation to the university, factory, and the struggles of everyday life? Straightforwardly, this 'fourth May' was the generalization of a refusal, or rejection, that crystalized with respect to '68's social movements relationship to the history of the workers movement. It was a disavowal of a certain set of assumptions about just what it is that must be done; an absolute rejection of the Dogmatic Image of (Political) Thought that Badiou perfectly describes in the following terms:

At the time we assumed that the politics of emancipation was neither a pure idea, an expression of the will nor a moral dictate, but that it was inscribed in, and almost programmed by, historical and social reality. One of that convictions implications was that this objective agent had to be transformed into a subjective power, that a social entity had to become a subjective actor. For that to happen, it had to be represented by a specific organization, and that is precisely what we called a party, a working-class or people's party. That party had to be present wherever there were site of power or intervention. There were certainly wide-ranging discussion about what the party was...But there was a basic agreement that there a historical agent, and that that agent had to be organized. That political organization obviously had a social basis in mass organizations that plunged their roots into an immediate social reality...This gives us something that still survives today: the idea that there are two sides to emancipatory political action. First there are social movements...[T]hen there is the party element.

(Badiou, *Communist Hypothesis*, 40-41)

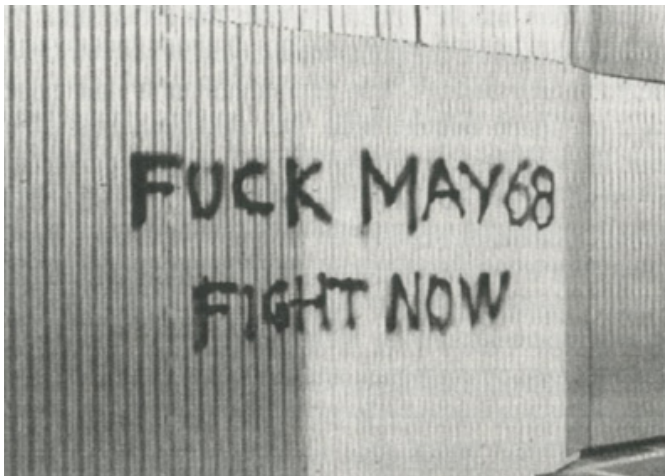
This fourth iteration of May, then, was the movements rejection of the Marxist-Leninist outline of how revolutions were to be carried out – replete with its workers' parties seizing state power with professional revolutionaries organizing the masses and founded on a confidence in the power of Party led unions and a belief in the transformative potential of electoral politics. Moreover, this rejection of revolutionary orthodoxy doubled as the grounds for the unification of '68's various movements. Thus, Badiou will define this fourth May as the collective attempt to construct "a vision of politics that was trying to wrench itself away from the old vision... [a politics] seeking to find that which might exist beyond the confines of classic revolutionism" (43). In addition to distancing itself from 'the confines of classic revolutionism,' the other decisive factor of the fourth May was its rejection of working-class identity as being the sole determinant of one's revolutionary potential. So what must understood regarding the 'events of May' is that 1968 was that it was political sequence that was able to be realized due to students, workers, cultural producers, and historically marginalized identity groups sharing the same horizon of struggle, which rejected *both* the politics of parliamentarianism, party led unions, and transitional programs *and* the figure of the proletariat as the *sole* bearer of

revolutionary potential. A sequence, says Badiou, whose guiding question was the following: "What would a new political practice that was not willing to keep everyone in their place look like? A political practice that accepted new trajectories...and meetings between people who did not usually talk to each other?" (45). Thus, we can say that '68 marks the birth of a political subjectivity defined by an unrelenting defiance of the social positions ('places') allotted to it by Capital – so much so that Kristin Ross will go on to describe this '68-subject' in a manner quite similar to that of the Badiouian militant who remains ever faithful to its Evental origins:

What has come to be called "the events of May" consisted mainly in students ceasing to function as students, workers as workers, and farmers as farmers: *May was a crisis in functionalism. The movement took the form of political experiments in declassification, in disrupting the natural "givenness" of places; it consisted of displacements that took students outside of the university, meetings that brought farmers and workers together, or students to the countryside*—trajectories outside of the Latin Quarter, to workers' housing and popular neighborhoods, a new kind of mass organizing (against the Algerian War in the early 1960s, and later against the Vietnam War) that involved physical dislocation. And in that physical dislocation lay a dislocation in the very idea of politics — *moving it out of its...proper place, which was for the left at that time the Communist Party.*

(Ross, *May 68 And Its Afterlives*, 25, emphasis mine)

And so... Badiou's framework of there being not two but *four* *May's* retain its usefulness since it allows us to conceive of '68 on its own terms, as a form of politics whose horizon of struggle was one that rejected past and present iterations of left-wing politics and gave consistency to its collectivity via the fourth-May-as-diagonal 'that links the other three [to one another]'. In this way we are led to the conclusion that it was only by virtue of the diagonal function of the fourth May that '68 succeeded in giving a new meaning to struggle itself; a vision of struggle no longer subordinate to any party line; no longer in want or need of recognition from the established institutions of the Left; no longer faithful to a notion of revolutionary agency confined to the point of production; and thereby making it possible to (briefly) live in reality what we have long been said to be in truth: ***non-alienated, collective, and thus free.***



[2]

Unlike the movements of 1968, those of 2018 increasingly find themselves confronted with the crisis of (social) reproduction for both capital and labour; and unlike our present moment, the struggles born out of '68 found themselves in that postwar period, which saw the annual growth rate of France's GDP continuously outperform its G7 counterparts (and it was only at the beginning of the 1980s that France's annual growth fell below this postwar growth rate):

Taking economic growth as a key indicator, France can be seen to have outperformed other G7 states consistently in the postwar period, right until the early 80s. In the period of 1960 to 1967 the French annual growth rate was 5.4 percent, as compared with a G7 average of 5.0 percent...from 1968 to 1973 France moved even further ahead of the G7 average, with its rate of 5.5 percent as against the G7 average of 4.4 percent; while in the globally depressed market of the 1970s, France grew at 2.8 percent each year in the period 1974-1979, as compared with 2.7 percent across the G7 states.

(William Gallois, *After the Deluge*, 56)

That said, the conclusion to be drawn is *not* the banal fact that France's underperformance vis-a-vis its postwar boom demonstrates how the contemporary terrain of struggle is different from that of '68. Rather, the implicit point being made is that the decline in France's annual growth rate is indicative of the structural shift accumulation away from production and toward circulation – for it is this turn away from production and toward circulation as dominant site of accumulation and realization of

value that has been identified as the key factor in understanding the particular way in which the capital-labour relation has been reconstituted as the contemporary terrain upon which struggles are played out. And according to the recent work of theorists such as Joshua Clover, what is perhaps the chief consequence of this recomposition of capital according to the logic of circulation is the transformation in the form resistance takes, where collective action turns away from the strike as tactic and assumes a revitalized riot-form (i.e. *riot-prime*). Thus, contra Badiou, perhaps it is better to say that the current cycle of struggles are defined less by '68's realization of the insufficiency at the heart of the traditional figure of emancipatory politics and more so by the fact that, as Clover puts it, we are witnessing what Marx called *the multiplication of the proletariat*:

It is by now impossible to suppose...a labor market that tends toward "full employment"...The long-term tendencies are apparent, and the signs we might expect to indicate a secular reversal [are] nowhere to be seen. There are no sails on the horizon. In this context class might be rethought...Given the relative dwindling of this form of labor [industrial/factory based], Marx must have meant something else when, arriving at this conclusion regarding surplus populations, he proposes that "accumulation of capital is therefore *multiplication of the proletariat*."

(Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 159, my emphasis)

Rather than any *absence* of emancipatory subjectivity, our present is defined by a proliferation, or 'multiplication,' of the number of social-positions that harbor within themselves the potential for communism; that is, the potential for becoming one more participant in "the real movement that abolishes itself and the present state of things."

taken from here

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALAIN BADIOU, *COMMUNIST HYPOTHESIS*, TR. DAVID MACEY AND STEVE CORCORAN, (VERSO: LONDON, 2015)

JOSHUA CLOVER, *RIOT. STRIKE. RIOT: THE NEW ERA OF UPRISINGS* (VERSO: LONDON, 2016)

WILLIAM GALLOIS, 'AGAINST CAPITALISM? FRENCH THEORY AND ECONOMY AFTER 1945,' IN *AFTER THE DELUGE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF POSTWAR FRANCE*, ED. JULIAN BOURG (LEXINGTON BOOKS: LONDON, 2004), PP. 49-72.

KARL MARX, FREDERIC ENGELS, *THE GERMAN IDEOLOGY*

KRISTIN ROSS, *MAY 68 AND ITS AFTERLIVES* (UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS: CHICAGO, 2002)

← PREVIOUS NEXT →

META

CONTACT
FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX

IMPRESSUM
DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG

TAXONOMY

CATEGORIES
TAGS
AUTHORS
ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

FACEBOOK
INSTAGRAM
TWITTER